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ABSTRACT

To determine the conditions of elementary school libraries in New York City public schools, elementary schools in eight districts were investigated, including schools with no functioning libraries, and visits were made to local branch public libraries and other programs that provide alternative or supplementary library services. In addition, interviews were conducted with library and education administrators. The study revealed that New York City elementary school libraries are in dire need of improvement, with lack of adequate personnel being the most serious problem. The following four specific recommendations are offered as a result of the study: (1) every elementary public school in New York City must have a functioning library as an integral part of the school program; (2) the State Regents must mandate that qualified teachers be placed in every elementary school library; (3) the Board of Education must request funds from the city to be allocated to the districts for library personnel; and (4) funds for library materials must be specifically designated in the state and city budgets and allocated to the public schools on a continuing basis. Listings of the members of the Citizens' Committee for Children of New York, Inc., the Women's City Club of New York, Inc., and the members of the joint study committee are included. (KM)

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THE KEY TO LITERACY
UNLOCKING LIBRARY DOORS

A LOOK AT LIBRARIES IN NEW YORK CITY PUBLIC ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

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A Joint Report By
Citizens' Committee for Children of New York, Inc.
Women's City Club of New York, Inc.

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PREFACE

In the winter of 1985 members of the Citizens' Committee for Children and Women's City Club of New York decided to undertake a study of elementary school libraries in New York City public schools. Believing that elementary school libraries are essential to the teaching of reading and aware that this service had suffered drastically in recent years, committee members set out to visit school libraries in various parts of the City. The Joint Study Committee's research confirmed that this once thriving system is in disarray. As a result we are urging public officials and educators to provide the support and direction necessary to re-establish the school library as an integral part of every elementary school curriculum.

On behalf of the Committee we want to thank all of the many teachers, principals and district personnel who were so helpful in documenting the current state of their libraries. In addition, we are grateful for the cooperation of those involved with alternative library programs, the City's public libraries and other professionals in the field. The Committee was especially fortunate to have members who had significant background in elementary school libraries and brought their expertise to this project. We are indebted to them for their thoughtful and careful investigation of this critical issue and the preparation of this report.

June L. Farmer, President
Women's City Club of New York

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THE KEY TO LITERACY—UNLOCKING LIBRARY DOORS

A look at libraries in New York City public elementary schools

INTRODUCTION

Literacy is the key to success in our society today. Literacy in the 1980's requires more than the ability to read words or even sentences; it requires a variety of reading skills and understanding. Many children in elementary schools, particularly here in New York City, are only presented with the mechanics of reading. While they often master the basic skills, good comprehension and the appreciation of literature elude them. If reading levels are to improve, children must be motivated and excited by being introduced to a wide range of reading experiences based on the goals of all reading, pleasure and information. Essential to this is access to books which answer questions and entertain and which complement and reinforce the teaching in the classroom. Only a professionally staffed library which serves all of the children in a school can provide these reading experiences. With a well-designed program which presents all components of reading, children are more likely to become life-long readers and truly literate adults.

In the past, school libraries in New York City elementary public schools provided children at every level with access to books and were staffed by librarians who developed programs which enhanced the school curriculum. Since the fiscal crisis of 1975, school libraries have suffered along with other school programs. In many elementary schools, libraries have been closed and collections left unattended and unused or dispersed to classrooms. This year for the first time there has been a renewal of interest in libraries. The State and City have allocated funds, on a per capita basis, for library materials. However, in many elementary schools there is no longer professional staff to supervise existing collections, much less select and circulate new materials. Believing that the situation was critical, members of the Education Section of Citizens' Committee for Children and of the Education Committee of Women's City Club of New York joined together to examine the condition of elementary school libraries in New York City public schools and to make recommendations for improvement.

BACKGROUND

A brief look at recent changes in funding and the regulations which govern the elementary school libraries revealed much of the story of why this service has suffered so deeply over the past ten years. Cuts in funding and redirection of resources, coupled with restrictions in the school librarians' contract, and lack of clear direction from the State Regents combined to devastate this once thriving school resource.

Funding for library personnel was until decentralization a regular line in the Board of Education budget. Since 1969, decisions relating to library personnel have been at the discretion of local districts or individual principals. Following the budget crisis of 1975 districts no longer had adequate funds. Library personnel for the elementary schools, not mandated by the state as in the case of high schools and junior high and intermediate schools, simply could not compete with other pressing needs. It was clear that the elementary school library was doubly at risk. It depended in part on the adequacy of funding for the school system as a whole and in part on the importance that the Board of Education and the individual districts placed on library services.

In the 1960's and early 1970's, funds for library materials came to the New York City school system from two sources: The City and the Federal Government. Prior to decentralization city tax levy funds were allocated to schools on a per capita basis. Since the 1975 fiscal crisis most districts have not included library materials in their budgets. In 1965 the Federal Government, through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (Title II), specifically provided money for library materials. These funds have been sharply reduced and are now given to the State in the form of a block grant. As a result, no federal funds have been allocated each year specifically for library use.

Although most state education funds are passed through to the Board of Education for general purposes, in some instances, the State provides categorical funds for specific items such as textbooks and computers. These funds are distributed on a per pupil basis and go to students in nonpublic as well as public schools. This year for the first time the State has allocated $2.00 per pupil for library materials and the City has matched this by setting aside $2 million for its public schools. Considering the cost of books today this is not a great deal of money, however it is an initial recognition of the need for library materials.

The Regents Action Plan (1984) puts considerable stress on library services. The Regents recognized the need to strengthen the elementary school libraries but did not recommend any changes in the state law governing school libraries.[1] Furthermore, a report prepared by the State Education Department in December 1984 for the Regents stated that "libraries are key to the achievement of the goals and requirements of the action plan . . . these requirements . . . imply that a library media program with qualified staff to work with teachers and students to manage the program . . . (with) adequate materials to support the curriculum . . . should exist in all schools." The Report recommended programmatic improvements, staff development and funds for materials, but did not require professional staff in public elementary school libraries. The need was clearly seen; unfortunately, the means did not follow.

An impediment to staffing libraries with licensed school librarians is an agreement made in 1962 by the director of The Bureau of School Libraries. In order to encourage the hiring of more "teachers of library" (called "Library Media Specialists" elsewhere in the State), they were asked to cover classes for classroom teachers during preparation periods. However, it was agreed that they would cover 20 classes per week in order to leave themselves preparation time. This is in contrast to other teachers, including common branch teachers assigned to libraries, who cover 25 hours of classes per week. As a result, after 1975, when money became short, there was a disincentive to retain teachers of library who could not provide as many hours of coverage as other cluster teachers.[2]

[1] Since 1974 the State Education Law requires "each elementary school to establish and maintain a library" . . . "the library in each elementary and secondary school shall meet the needs of the pupils, and shall provide an adequate complement to the institutional program in various areas of the curriculum." However, there is no staff requirement.

[2] Cluster teachers are specialists (Art, Music, Library, Gym etc.) who cover classes during classroom teachers' preparation periods.

METHOD

After some preliminary research, members of the Committee initiated a series of visits with principals, teachers, librarians, parents, and district personnel. In the winter of 1985 they investigated a range of elementary school libraries in eight districts. Included were libraries staffed by trained personnel and those maintained by volunteers or paraprofessionals or some other non-professional arrangement. The Committee also went to schools that had no functioning libraries at all. Visits were made to local branch public libraries as well as to other programs that provide alternative or suplementary library services. Members met with Geraldine Clark, Acting Director of Library Services for the Board of Education. They also met with Laura Goodman, Chairperson, Library Media Services for the United Federation of Teachers, and Laura Chodos, New York State Regent. In addition, interviews were conducted with personnel in charge of children's programs for the public library systems. The Committee cooperated closely with the Educational Priorities Panel which was preparing a report written to support recommendations for library funding to be presented at the May 1985 city budget hearings.[3]

FINDINGS

The Schools

The investigations revealed wide variations in the commitment to libraries on the part of districts and schools. Since staffing for elementary school libraries has not been mandated by the State, each district has the option of specifically funding library positions. Although some districts have begun to reopen and upgrade their libraries, attitudes varied greatly, and disparities were evident from the district level down. Only three of the districts visited had a person designated district-wide as solely responsible for libraries.[4] In some districts responsibility for libraries came under the aegis of the reading or special projects coordinator; in others the coordinator's responsibility was divided between libraries and computers. In most of these districts the libraries did not receive adequate attention. In some instances, no one was directly responsible for libraries or library development, and it was difficult to discover what, if anything, was available.

In every district a staff member was assigned as liaison to the Office of Library Services of the Central Board. These staff members were not necessarily trained library personnel and libraries were not necessarily their primary responsibility. Meetings are held from time to time to discuss common problems. However, among those interviewed there was a consensus that the Board of Education has not provided sufficient support for elementary school libraries.

It was apparent that where there were district library coordinators, they played a critical role in providing support and technical assistance to existing and incipient programs and kept the issue of library needs alive. For example, one library coordinator served on a district-wide library committee which developed a three-year plan to reopen all school libraries. In addition, she surveyed the needs of the district, provided training for new librarians, and helped secure funds for materials.

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[3] *School Libraries . . . No Reading Allowed.* The Educational Priorities Panel, N.Y. May, 1985

[4] At the district level the person assigned to be in charge of libraries can be either a "supervisor" or "coordinator." A supervisor has more authority to implement district policy and can have greater impact on services. However, there is currently only one in the system. Therefore, in this study, the person in charge of libraries at the district level is referred to as a "coordinator."

At the school level it was the principal who determined whether libraries were open and how they were to be staffed. The principal could assign a teacher of library or a common branch teacher to open the library. Some principals encouraged parents to help in the school library and raise money for books and library materials. One principal had written proposals for special funding for library projects. He had created a library which was the hub of the learning process in the school. It can be done, but it is very rare.

Visits to the schools revealed a variety of staffing patterns: Licensed teachers of library who ran the library as cluster teachers, common branch teachers including former teachers of library serving out of license, cluster teachers, specialists in other subjects who used the library for their classes, librarians who were shared between two or more schools, and paraprofessionals and parent volunteers who managed the mechanics of keeping the libraries open as a lending service, but did not teach or implement programs. Finally, in one school visited a special education teacher and her class decided to circulate books from the otherwise closed library.

Though many of these arrangements were genuine attempts to provide some access to books, it was evident that they fell far short of a system-wide, well-integrated library program. Too often the librarian served only a portion of the classes in the schol and did so only on an irregular basis. Too often the lack of trained staff meant that only a minimal lending service could be provided. Children rarely had an opportunity for browsing or were they introduced to a variety of materials.

Even in those elementary schools reporting a library staffed by a full-time teacher, service was uneven. The size of the school and number of classes determined the amount of time each child spent in the library. In several of the schools observed preference was given to upper grades, while kindergarten through third grade classes, where learning to read begins, spent little or no time in the libraries.

The most promising examples of strong library programs were those in which a trained librarian or common branch teacher, with the active support of the principal, was encouraged to develop the library program as an integral part of the school curriculum. These successful teachers of library, by whatever name, were encouraged to maintain close ties with classroom teachers, were given support when necessary and were, in some cases, given schedule adjustments so that they could meet the needs of all their students.

In the course of its visits the Committee met a few of these librarians. When the visitors arrived at one school, the librarian was conferring with the principal and both were extremely proud of the library program which had been developed. Special projects were part of the program as was a strong social studies component. This was a small school. The library was open to all the students, and the librarian knew every child in the building.

However, this standard was indeed exceptional. More typical was the case of a librarian in a much larger school who felt harassed by the pressures of covering classes and overwhelmed by the task of reorganizing books while carrying a heavy teaching load. In fact, she dealt with only a fraction of the classes in the school. Here, as in many other schools, the principal apologized for the library but very proudly showed off his computer room. In another school, where the library had recently been reopened, a common branch teacher was enthusiastically trying to develop a library program. It was clear that she undestood the need for good library services and had the support of her principal, but it was equally clear that she needed assistance in designing the program to mesh with the individual levels of the children and with the classroom curriculum.

What about schools with no functioning libraries at all? In several districts severe overcrowding has forced the conversion of libraries into classrooms. In these instances, most of the libraries have been dismantled and the collections distributed among the classrooms. In some schools efforts were being made to provide book carts and to circulate books from class to class. But, as one principal commented, "You can't put an encyclopedia in every classroom."

In districts where space was not the problem, lack of staff led to closing of once intact libraries. In these libraries most of the books remained on the shelves and the door was simply shut. In one school the immaculate and undisturbed library served as a faculty lounge, available for meetings and farewell parties, otherwise remaining securely locked. Often the collections had been partially dismantled, either distributed to classrooms, or in most cases just "raided". In some of these schools well-selected classroom libraries had been developed. In other schools, the classroom libraries were minimal, stale and uninviting. Nowhere were they a satisfactory substitute for the richer collection of a basic central library. In many cases the libraries were sufficiently intact, and reopening would be possible even without a large infusion of new materials.

While the primary requirement of the libraries was staffing, the need for new materials was also apparent. Few collections included samples of the many fine new stories and biographies that have appeared in recent years. Most reference collections dated from the late 1960's, thus they did not include information about recent political or scientific developments. The librarian of a former model library said he could barely afford to maintain the books he had, let alone order new ones or update his audio-visual collection. Another struggling librarian sent damaged books home with children hoping they would be mended. Lost or worn-out books were rarely replaced. In spite of these problems, at least these librarians would be in a position to guide the selection of new materials when they become available.

Alternative Programs

In addition to visiting elementary school libraries, the Committee sought out programs which were designed to enhance school library services with the thought that these might provide a pattern for useful alternatives. The most interesting were The Friendly Place/El Sitio Simpatico in District 4 and The John Steptoe Library and The Pura Belpré Children's Caravan in District 16.

The Friendly Place was developed as a demonstration model by the American Reading Council. This "community based library/bookstore/family learning center" is housed in a large storefront. Their program includes regular weekly visits for a "book and game" period for nine classes from a local public school. The success of the Friendly Place has given impetus for a revival of the elementary school libraries in the district.

In the early 1970's, District 16 received grants to develop the Steptoe Library and the Children's Caravan. Both were designed as early childhood facilities which would supplement the regular library program in the District. The Steptoe Library which is currently staffed by a common branch teacher is located in an elementary school. It has a large collection of books and audiovisual materials appropriate for young children. The Caravan is a mobile unit which moves from school to school and circulates a collection of books selected from a central storeroom. It can serve only half a class at a time. The Caravan is staffed by a librarian, an educational assistant and a driver/technician. In both of these programs teachers accompany their classes. Each program serves about five of the District's thirteen elementary schools and these schools are rotated each year.

The Committee also examined the services offered by the public library systems to determine whether they might provide an alternative to school libraries. According to interviews with personnel from the different systems there is "unwritten cooperation" between the branch librarians and the schools. The extent of this cooperation depends on the initiative of the school librarians, teachers or principals. The branch libraries have children's rooms staffed by professional children's librarians and are available for visits by public school classes. In most cases these trips are school-initiated on a once-a-year per class basis for obtaining library cards and giving children a general overview of the library's facilities and program. Many school librarians and teachers encourage children to go to the local library on their own, but the logistics of getting young children to a public library regularly are very difficult for most families.

The Committee visited a branch library whose program was described as an exemplary illustration of cooperation with a local public school. Although located on the same block as the school and with the expressed support of both the school principal and the branch librarian, a fully developed cooperative program did not appear to exist. Even here, class visits were viewed as "school trips" rather than part of an overall curriculum.

CONCLUSIONS

The Committee's investigations revealed that the elementary school libraries in the City are in dire need of improvement. It is clear that the events of the last decade have undermined the excellent program that once existed. Now that the fiscal crisis is over, it is time to renew this essential service.

The Committee came to the conclusion that the greatest need in the elementary school libraries is for personnel. To achieve better levels of service significant increases in staffing must be made.

On the district level, a coordinator, solely responsible for libraries, can assist in reopening closed libraries and can integrate library programs into the curricula of the schools where libraries currently exist. Where functioning libraries do not yet exist, such as in overcrowded districts, a coordinator can supervise and support temporary measures to ensure that all children receive library services. The coordinator can work with library staff on skills and program development and can also help with the selection of new materials.

On the school level principals must staff their libraries with professionals. However, it seems unrealistic to expect to find licensed teachers of library in many school libraries today. It is more likely that a common branch teacher would be covering the library. Principals must give these teachers support and encouragement to up-grade their skills. In addition, time must be provided for work with the collections. In this area paraprofessionals, parents, and volunteers can perform an excellent service in assisting the teacher in the library.

The Committee appreciates that an infusion of new materials in the system is important. However, the primary requisite is professional staff to reorganize existing libraries, develop basic programs and supervise the selection and integration of materials into the collections.

Well-conceived programs exist which are currently providing services in lieu of school library programs. At present, the Friendly Place and the programs in District 16 are alternatives to limited school services but neither was designed for this purpose. Branch libraries can be regarded as supplemental to school programs. All these programs are valid enhancements to the school library system but cannot be expected to serve as substitutes.

If elementary school library services are to improve in New York City, there must be a strong commitment at every level. It must come from the State Regents who have reaffirmed the importance of library service in their Action Plan but failed to mandate the necessary personnel in elementary schools, from the State which must allocate a reasonable level of funds for library materials, and from the City which has included money for library materials in the 1985-86 budget but has made no provision for sufficient personnel to improve services. This commitment must also come from the Board of Education which much give more attention and support to elementary school libraries, from the district school boards and superintendents who must appoint full-time coordinators to supervise the provision of services and from the principals who must implement specific school programs. With a coordinated effort good library service could once again be a central part of every school's curriculum.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. *Every elementary public school in New York City must have a functioning library as an integral part of the school program.* It should be staffed by qualified professionals who are allotted sufficient time to work with classes and develop a full library program. All of the children in every school should have access to the library on a regular basis. The collections should be well-maintained and up-to-date.

2. *The State Regents must mandate that qualified teachers, either licensed teachers of library or common branch teachers who are actively working towards a school librarian's license, be placed in every elementary school library.*

3. *The Board of Education must request funds from the City to be allocated to the districts for library personnel.* The priority for these funds in each district should be the appointment of a supervisor/coordinator solely responsible for school libraries. New funds must supplement, not supplant, funds currently expended by the districts.

4. *Funds for library materials must be specifically designated in the State and City budgets and allocated to the public schools on a continuing basis.*

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